

WISCONSIN WOMEN MAKING HISTORY

THEIR STORIES OUR LEGACY

www.womeninwisconsin.org



ZOE DUNNING

1963

City: Milwaukee

County: Milwaukee

Zoe Dunning was one of the only out gay servicemembers in the U.S. military for over a decade and an advocate for repealing the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” law.

Zoe Dunning was born on July 10, 1963, and raised in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. She was accepted to the US Naval Academy with a full-ride scholarship in one of the first classes to admit women. Dunning liked military life and was proud to serve her country, but when she realized she was a lesbian, she felt conflicted. At that time, LGBTQ+ people couldn’t serve in the military. If anyone were to learn she was a lesbian, she would be expelled. She kept her identity secret through her 1985 graduation and the next six years on active duty.

In 1991, Dunning switched from active duty to the Navy Reserves and enrolled at the Stanford University Graduate School of Business in California. In her non-military life, she could be open about her sexuality, even serving as co-president of a gay and lesbian student group. However, she kept her personal and military worlds separate. Dunning was asked to speak at a January 1993 rally against the military’s ban on gay people. She said no at first because the event would be public, but later changed her mind when she realized the voices of those directly hurt by the ban weren’t being heard. At the rally, she announced, “I am both a naval officer and a lesbian, and I refuse to live a lie anymore.” The next time she reported for duty, she was told to leave.

The Navy held a hearing and determined that Dunning should be discharged (removed from the military). Two weeks later, President Bill Clinton announced a policy called Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell (DADT). Under DADT, lesbian, gay, and bisexual people could serve in the military if they stayed in the closet. People could still be discharged for “homosexual conduct,” but military officials needed evidence to start an investigation and weren’t supposed to ask servicemembers if they were gay directly. (Transgender people continued to be banned outright.) Dunning’s case was heard again under DADT, and she won.

Even while these legal battles were happening, the Navy promoted Dunning to Lieutenant Commander. She continued serving in the military for the next 13 years - one of the only out lesbians to do so while DADT was in effect. She spoke out against DADT and served on the Servicemembers Legal Defense Network, a nonprofit group that provided legal help to gay, lesbian, and bisexual members of the military. Dunning retired from the Navy as Commander in 2007 after 22 years of service. In 2010, DADT was repealed, and Dunning joined President Barack Obama on stage while he signed the repeal into law.

Dunning has also been successful outside the Navy. She earned her MBA from Stanford in 1993 and began work as a consultant providing business advice to companies. She previously served as a commissioner of the San Francisco Public Library and sat on the advisory board for Vets in Tech, a nonprofit organization that named her Veteran of the Year in 2017. In addition, Dunning has taught classes at Stanford since 2006.

To learn more, visit womeninwisconsin.org/profile/zoe-dunning